
UCF Forum

5-13-2020


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Regaining Our Innocence

By Chung Park
UCF Forum columnist
Wednesday, May 13, 2020

Planning a concert to reassure us and provide hope for a return to our lives.



(Photo by Nick Leyva '150)

The events of the past two months have unfolded with terrifying suddenness only to be followed by a slow drip of grim news.

Within three days of our spring break we learned that classes had been canceled for the rest of the month, with the news coming just a few days later that all in-person classes for the rest of the semester were moving to online.

Lives have been interrupted. Graduations, holidays, sporting events and even funerals have been delayed or canceled.

Our orchestra season being cut short is a minor event in the context of the tragedies we have seen, but I can't help feeling disappointed that we were unable to showcase the work our students had put in before the world suddenly stopped.

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But with those performances all called off, I started thinking about our first concert of next year, and what we could program to help us heal.

I wanted to choose music that would reassure us and provide hope for a return to our lives. Most of all, I wanted us to regain some of the childlike innocence that we've lost during this uncertain time.

The concert will open with the *Ma mère l'Oye* (Mother Goose), by Maurice Ravel. This is a work I have a deep personal affection for. Perhaps it's the pentatonic melodies that remind me of the Korean folk songs my mother and grandmother used to sing to me as a child, or the incredible colors that Ravel is able to paint with the orchestra that would delight any child who loves a big box of crayons, or the grown-up things, like military fanfares, that are shrunk down to kid size.

But I think it's the ending of the last movement, *The Fairy Garden*, that moves me the most. The percussion glistens, the harp runs up and down the instrument with celebratory glissandi, and our child-sized fanfare plays while a small child in pajamas looks out over the vista of her bedroom, queen of all she surveys.

Samuel Barber's *Knoxville: Summer of 1915* will follow. Barber, though not a son of the south, captures a languid, humid, star-filled summer evening spent on the lawn to perfection. Set to excerpts from a short prose piece by James Agee, *Knoxville* is written from the child's viewpoint and filled with affectionate memories from Agee's childhood. This is my favorite excerpt from the text:

We all lie there, my mother, my father, my uncle, my aunt,

And I too am lying there.

They are not talking much, and the talk is quiet,

Of nothing in particular,

Of nothing at all.

The stars are wide and alive,

They seem each like a smile

Of great sweetness,

And they seem very near.

This poem, and the music that goes along with it, is a pure distillation of an idyllic childhood.

Next is the Evening Prayer and Dream Pantomime from Hänsel und Gretel by Engelbert Humperdinck. Brother and sister, lost in the woods, are protected by fourteen angels as they sleep. The sweet innocence of the lost pair, with their hopeful and plaintive longing for protection, is deeply moving. They sing:

HANSEL and GRETTEL

I want to go to sleep in the evening,

fourteen angels stand around me:

two at my head,

two at my feet,

two to my right,

two to my left,

two who cover me,

two who wake me ...

GRETTEL

... two who point me

to heaven Paradeisen!

HANSEL

... two, who point to heaven!

Our concert will close with Gustav Mahler's Fourth Symphony. This is a slight work standing amongst the colossi of Mahler's other symphonies. Much shorter in length and utilizing a smaller orchestra with no low brass, it has a lightness and affectionate nature that are absent in its gigantic brethren. The symphony's closing movement describes a

child's vision of, "Das himmlische Leben," the heavenly life, as sung by a boy soprano. Simple pleasures abound in heaven:

No worldly tumult

is to be heard in heaven.

All live in greatest peace.

I hope that everyone who reads this is well. The UCF Symphony Orchestra cannot wait to get back on the concert stage to bring our audiences together and create a space for fellowship and healing.

Chung Park is the director of the UCF Symphony and Chamber Orchestras, head of string music education, and an assistant professor in the Department of Music. He can be reached at Chung.Park@ucf.edu.